

# *Tzimisces' Letter to King Ashot*

by **Nicholas Adontz**

This article, which was published in the journal *Byzantion*, 1934, t. IX, pp. 371-377, analyses a famous letter written by the Byzantine emperor John Tzimisces (969-976/977) to the Armenian king Ashot III Bagratuni (952-977). The present English translation was made by Robert Bedrosian from the reprint of the text in *Études Arméno-byzantines* (Lisbon, 1965), pp. 141-147, "La lettre de Tzimiscès au roi Ashot." Attached to the document are the French original and a Modern Armenian translation (Չմշկիկի նամակը Աշոտ արքային) extracted from *Works of Nicholas Adontz in Five Volumes*, Volume 5 (Erevan, 2012), pp. 366-370 [in Armenian], P. H. Hovhannisyan, editor. Published on the Internet in 2018.

---

## [Footnotes](#)

[141]

The document in question is well known. It concerns the letter written by Emperor Tzimisces to the king of Armenia, Ashot Bagratuni (953-977), regarding Tzimisces' celebrated campaign against the Arabs in 975. The letter has been preserved for us by Matthew of Edessa, and is accessible via the French translation of Dulaurier (1). It also has been translated into Russian by one of the professors of Armenian at the Lazareff Institute (2).

Is there any reason to question the document's authenticity? [142] It contains nothing which is incompatible with what we know about Tzimisces' expedition. The only aspect which might be troublesome is the poorly-understood reason why the emperor would appeal to the king of Armenia. The letter, such as it has been translated into French and Russian, does not allow us to learn this. The translators did not understand the last part of the document. One of them simply omitted it, while Dulaurier rendered it incorrectly.

Matthew of Edessa narrates that Emperor Tzimisces, as soon as he received news about the disastrous outcome of a battle, launched a campaign against the Arabs to preserve the honor of the army (1). Prior to this, General Melias (Mleh), after an initial triumph, had suffered defeat near Amida and had fallen into the enemy's hands. Tzimisces first went to Armenia, entering Taron and camping opposite the fortress called Aytseats'-berd (Goats' Fortress), close to the city of Mush. The unexpected arrival of the Byzantine army was alarming to the Armenian princes. Thus they hurried to assemble their troops near King Ashot III, wanting to be ready for any eventuality.

However, the emperor was not ill-disposed toward the country. He entered into negotiations with King Ashot, concluded a treaty of alliance with him, demanded an auxiliary force of 10,000 men from him, took victuals, and departed to continue his campaign. The emperor was victorious everywhere, reaching as far as Jerusalem. At that point he ended his campaign and sent to Ashot

the letter which interests us, in which he relates his exploits. At the conclusion of the letter, he returns to the question of the fortress of Aytseats'-berd, and we see that this issue had been the object of a discussion between Ashot and himself during his sojourn in Taron. It is precisely this section of the letter which presents difficulties. The Russian translator has omitted it, as though it were [143] a separate writing, not belonging to the letter addressed to Ashot. Dulaurier has translated it literally, without realizing that the Armenian text is corrupt and in need of correction to be understood.

Here is the Armenian text:

**Յանափոռոտէն պռտաւսպարին Դերջնայ Լեւոնի եւ Տարօնոյ  
զօրավարին (ողջոյն եւ ի տէր խնդալ). Արդ գիտացաք որ զԱյծեաց  
բերդն որպէս յանձին կալար չես տուեալ. եւ այժմ գրեթաք առ  
զօրավարդ մեր, որ ոչ գբերդն առնու եւ ոչ զջորեանն՝ զոր  
պայմանեցեր. զի այժմ չեղել առ մեզ պետք. բայց զքառասուն  
հազար ովովան զոր յուղարկեցաք, տուր տանել առ զօրավարն  
մեր, զի առաքէ առ թագաւորութիւնս մեր... (1)**

Here is Dulaurier's translation:

"To the *protospatharios* of Derjan, Anaphourden, from Leon, the military governor of Taron, greetings and joy in the Lord. We have learned that you have not turned over the Fort of the Goats, as you had promised. We have written to our commander not to occupy it, and not to take the mules which you agreed to supply, since we no longer have any need for them. But as for the 40,000 *obols* which we sent, have them taken to our general who will send them to Our Kingdom." (2)

One can see that the translator views this passage as a distinct writing addressed to a certain *protospatharios* Anaphourden.

However, this supposed name is in the ablative, not the dative, case; and one would search in vain for such a name in any onomasticon. Moreover, from the proposed translation one cannot grasp the precise meaning of this passage. We know that Taron, annexed to the Empire after the death of its prince Ashot in 966, formed an administrative unit with the Derjan (= Derxene), under the authority of a military commander or *strategos*, **զօրավար/zo'ravar**. *Protospatharios* Leon is precisely the general who filled this function. This man, who is styled in [144] the letter "our commander," is none other than this same Leon. Thus it is evident that this is not a letter addressed to Leon, especially since Leon is spoken about within it in the third person. The text, as understood and translated by Dulaurier, clearly is nonsensical.

We believe that the enigmatic word **յանափոռոտէն/yanap'or'te'n** is not a proper name. It should be read **յանափոռաէն/yanap'or'ae'n**, the ablative of a word easily recognizable as Greek ἀναφορά, "report," the word being **յ-ἀναφορά-էն** (1). The phrase should be correctly translated "**From the report of the *protospatharios* of Derjan, Leon, general of Taron** we have learned that you (meaning the king of Armenia) have not turned over the fortress of Aytseats'. We

have just written to our *strategos* (meaning Leon, *strategos* of Derjan and Taron) to take neither the fortress nor the mules you had agreed to deliver."

The only disadvantage of this interpretation is that it ignores the expression "salutation and joy in Our Lord". However, it seems to us that these words have been displaced. Originally they would have been found after the recitation of the emperor's triumphs, and before the word յանափորոշան/yanap'or'ae'n.

The final part of the document appears to be a post-script. After recounting his conquests, the emperor says to his correspondent "greetings and joy in Our Lord." Then he returns to the question of Aytseats' fortress as well as to other obligations which had been placed on King Ashot and which, according to the emperor's *strategos*, had not been implemented. These are precisely the questions which led the emperor to write his letter to Ashot.

We see that the question of Taron has not been resolved. Annexation had been proclaimed; however, a strategically important position, the fortress of Aytseats'-berd had eluded control of the military governor of the region. Ashot had promised to turn it over to the governor, but according to the latter's report, it was not yet in the governor's possession. The emperor [145] declares that he is ready to renounce this acquisition. This seems to conform perfectly to the truth. The princes of Taron, Grigor and Bagrat, deprived of their possessions, were still in their lands at the time Skleros raised a rebellion in 976, and they were among the first to embrace the cause of the rebel.

The emperor also demanded that the Armenian king should remit to his general the 40,000 *obols* which he had sent. The *obol*, a sixth of a *drachma*, had a value of 15 *centimes* of our currency. Thus 40,000 *obols* would have a value of 6,000 francs. Even admitting that this coin was in circulation in Byzantium at the time, the sum is too insignificant to be an issue of negotiations. There is an error here. As the notes to the Armenian edition indicate, the manuscript reads զխռովուլան, *zxr'ovulawn*. As the result of an unfortunate error, the letters **խռ** were taken as numbers (խ = 40, ռ = 1000). The correct reading is զխռսվուլան, which is the word χρυσόβουλλον. The Armenian king is bid to return the *chrysobull* ["golden seal"] which the emperor had sent to the same general, who would forward it to Constantinople. It is not clear what the matter concerns. Is it about the imperial seal which the emperor wanted to have sent to Constantinople, or some document confirmed by a *chrysobull*? The end of the letter seems to be abridged. Something is missing there.

The present article already had been written when we had an opportunity to consult the *Chronicle of Smbat Sparapet* (1). This author of the 13th century has left us a resume of the *History of Matthew of Edessa* which allows us, to a certain extent, to review the text of the source that it was based on. Smbat rendered the passage in question as follows: "[The emperor] also wrote to the *protospatharios* and to the general in Taro'n for them to send to King Ashot a *chrysobull* (2), 30,000 gold *dahekans*, 2,000 servants, and 10,000 horses and 1,000 mules for the affection and unity which he had concluded."

Thus, one of our conjectures (about the *chrysobull*) has been verified. However, Smbat is mistaken in taking the *protospatharios* of Derjan and the general of Taron to be two separate people, when they are one and the same man. As we have already noted [146], Derjan and Taron

constituted a single *strategie*. After the death of Bardas Phocas, one of his partisans, Chorduanel the Magister, seized these areas according to the testimony of Asoghik (1). Thus in 990 they had been reunited.

Moreover we see that, according to Smbat, it was the general of Taron who was charged with delivering to Ashot the *chrysobull* and the other enumerated gifts, which is not mentioned at all in Matthew. Could it be that the text of Matthew is corrupt or that Smbat has utilized a different source? The first hypothesis is the most likely. Without a doubt, Smbat had a more correct copy of our historian than that which we now possess. It allows us to reconstruct the original text as follows: "However, the *chrysobull* (the 30,000 gold coins, the 2,000 captives, the 10,000 horses and 1,000 mules), we have had taken (**տոռաք**, instead of **տոռը**) to our commander so that they be sent to Your Kingdom (**ձեր** "your," instead of **մեր** "our")."

This slight correction is sufficient to put Matthew's passage in order and to restore its correct meaning. Thus the author of the letter is writing to the king of Armenia that he is sending to him, along with gifts, a golden bulla confirming the ceding of the fortress in dispute.

This recalls the case of the Armenian princes Vasakios, Krikorikes, Pazounes, Ismail, and Melias, who requested from Emperor Leo VI and received from him *chrysobulls* for domains they were going to occupy in the Lykandos area (2).

The curopalate of Iberia asserted his rights over Phasiana and the fortress of Avnik by claiming that he possessed them under *chrysobulls*, a claim which, however, after investigation, proved false (1). Leo VI had given to the prince of Taron "The barbarian's house" in Constantinople χρυσοβουλλίον χωρίς "without golden bullae," as a consequence of which Romanus Lecapenus deprived the prince's heirs of it (2).

The *chrysobull* which John Tzimiskes was speaking about, certainly, had a similar significance, and the corrupt passage in Matthew of Edessa should be corrected accordingly.

---

## Notes

### [141]

(1) E. Dulaurier, *Chronique de Matthieu d'Edesse*, Paris, 1868. The Armenian text was published a year later, in 1869, in Jerusalem. The second edition published in Ejmiatsin, filled some lacunae, sometimes extremely important ones, found in the first, but also is still very far from being a critical edition.

(2) *Vizantijskij Vremennik*, X (1903), p. 19.

---

### [142]

(1) Matthew of Edessa calls Melias *demeslikos* (it should be *domeslikos*), that is, *domestikos* [commander]. Indeed, he occupied just such as position being general of the East. There was a

similar office for the West. The separation became apparent for the first time around 960, during the time of Romanus II. Nicephorus Phocas occupied the position of *domestikos* of the East, while his brother Leon held the position of *domestikos* της Δύσης [of the West] (Theoph. Cont., p.472). Nicephorus, similarly, is styled *domestikos* της Ανατολής [of the East], Const. Porph., *De Cerim.*, p. 433.

---

[143]

(1) *Matthieu d'Édesse*, ch. 16, p. 33.

(2) *Ibid.*, Dulaurier trans., ch. 16, pp. 23-24.

---

[144]

This word is unusual in the Armenian language. To my knowledge, it is found in only one place other than our text, in an Armenian document of the 7th century, appearing in a letter about monotheism sent from Pope Martin I to Emperor Constant II, after the Council of Latran in 649, Անանուն ժամանակագրութիւն/ *Ananun zhamanakagrut'iwn*, the *Anonymous Chronicle*, p. 77.

---

[145]

(1) Smbat Sparapet, *Taregirk'* (Paris, 1859), p. 36.

(2) Correctly written խոսաֆոլն/*xr'safuln*.

---

[146]

(1) *Asoghik*, III, 27, p. 251.

(2) The *chrysobull* of Melias has left its trace in the epic of the borderlands, entitled *Digenis Akritas* (Trepizond, v. 1540 ff.). Romanus Lecapenus there grants to the hero, by a *bull*, twice the value of the goods seized from his grandfather. H. Gregoire saw in this gift of Lecapenus the *chrysobull* of Melias, and even identified Digenis with Melias (*Revue des Études grecques*, t. XLVII, 1933, p. 63 ff.). Among the more or less imaginary heroes of this Byzantine epic, the Armenian Melias appears as the sole historical figure as well as the undisputed hero of the borderlands. He is not only *akritic* as lord of the *akritic* military theme of Lykandos, but also *digenis* ("of two bloods"), as a Byzantine-Armenian. H. Gregoire has correctly recognized this man's importance without, however, doing it full justice.

---

[147]

(1) Constantine Porphyrogenitus, *De adm.*, p. 202.

(2) *Ibid.*, p. 185 ff.